

LOVE ON HAIGHT

God that dope was strong! She should've noticed how he'd stopped after one hit, and the booze and pizza didn't help. Her stomach felt seasick like her head. It was dark and cold here too, with just one shrunk-up, threadbare blanket, and his couch was lumpy.

Back home in Tracy, where her mom was probably calling everybody by now and super freaked out, the night would be warm and she could leave her bedroom window open to the sound of crickets. That was the good part, but there were lots of reasons she'd run away.

The mistake had been running to the city. She'd heard about Haight-Ashbury for years, mainly from her grandma on holidays, and while her parents were still together they always smirked and rolled their eyes. But when you got there, it was fucked.

Nearly all day hitching on back roads to the Dublin BART station, then changing to the wrong train in Oakland and taking forever to finally get off on Market Street, where she still had to walk blocks and blocks lugging a school pack full of her stuff. Then she was on a grungy corner with staring tourists, dog poop, cars honking, smelly exhaust and fog so cold and blowy it could've been winter. She knew about the fog from when her dad took her to a Giants game once, but nothing like this.

Two hours of shivering and hanging out and she hadn't met anyone cool or anyone, really, until some punky kids came along, punkier than her, who shared their Lucky Strikes and joked and acted nice before they tripped her and held her down and stole the backpack with her phone and most of her money in it.

So after she stopped crying it turned into panhandling for real and she was scared and it got darker and she was just about to try a collect call home when someone gave her enough for a cup of coffee. As she huddled inside by the window drinking it, this man showed up, a

balding, black man, maybe as old as fifty, wearing a fleece hoodie, sandals and wild African-looking pants.

“Hey, Little Lady!” He sat at her table and pointed to himself. “Reverend Earl here.”

Ignoring him, she looked away.

“You seem lost, hungry and scared, sweetheart. How ’bout I help?”

“No, thank you.”

“Think about it,” he went on. “Cold night, I got a place you can sleep, bit of food and maybe we get some laughs.”

She didn’t answer, but she was really scared now, terrified. Sooner or later the coffee shop with its buzzing yellowish lights would kick her out and where else could she go?

“Look,” he said, “I’m safe. Man a’ God. Nothin’ to worry about.”

His place was uphill, three blocks away, a tiny dark storefront with swirling psychedelic letters across the top that said New Ark Pentecostal Church, and on the curtained window, Reverend Earl Jones - Manicures, Pedicures and Hair Removal.

Leading them through the deep gloom of a strangely cluttered interior, he took her hand, rigid in the supple warmth of his. Then they were in a tiny, beat-up apartment, where he lit one lamp. A small sink and counter along the far wall, a sagging couch, a table and chair, a doorway to a microscopic bathroom and another door to a bedroom that was more like a walk-in closet. Everything smelled of cooking oil, overlain with a residue of incense.

“Relax,” he said expansively. “We got us some Southern Comfort, some good weed and half a pizza in the fridge.”

She was crazy even to be there and she only knew Janis Joplin liked Southern Comfort and she'd had hits on maybe twelve joints in her whole life. But pizza, that she really needed, and the couch too. "OK," she said. "Can I use the facilities?"

"Sure, Little Lady, help yourself."

The rest just sort of happened, but they did eat and Southern Comfort was spicy-sweet-hot, like Captain Crunch mixed with vodka, and the weed went around, whenever that got started, and he was so quirky funny she almost did laugh. But pretty soon she was falling asleep while he talked.

"Gospel a' Love, that's my preachin'! We all gotta love each other, no matter who or where, and forgive each other, look out for each other, and try to pay back whatever we get. You agree, sweetheart?"

"Oh," he went on, "she's dozin' off. Too bad this space heater's broke. Tell me your name and we'll tuck you in for the night."

She heard that last part but slumped down more and stayed silent.

"OK, maybe in the morning." He tossed a blanket over her. "But you get cold you let me know." He turned off the lamp. "There's body heat to burn in the next room."

Off and on she could hear him rustling around and she never actually slept, not just because of her mind and gut, half drunk, half stoned and half sick from eating too fast, but from knowing she'd set herself up to be raped. It wouldn't stop him that she was gay. Then his door opened and he came back in.

“Got an idea, Little Lady. Just what a girl like you needs.”

Face up, still completely dressed, jeans and all, she squeezed her eyes closed and locked her knees together. He sat on the outer edge of the couch and pulled the blanket away from her feet. She stole a glance, and in the light from his doorway saw him holding shiny things on a tray.

“I’m gonna paint your toenails!” he said. “Fuchsia! The color a’ love!”

She heard her voice, thin and weak, so she must have been speaking. “I’ll tell my mom if you hurt me, because tomorrow I’m going home.”

“Good,” he said, with his back to her as he stripped off her socks and put cotton balls between her toes. “Glad to hear it.”